

## FAMILY AS DOMESTIC CHURCH: DEVELOPMENTAL TRAJECTORY, LEGITIMACY, AND PROBLEMS OF APPROPRIATION

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*[The identity of the family as the domestic church is not self-evident yet it has sustained serious theological development since Vatican II. The question is whether or not the trajectory it has followed has always been legitimate. With greater acceptance, the problems of authentic appropriation have emerged. This essay will examine the trajectory which the domestic church has taken, its theological foundations, its seminal emergence at Vatican II, and the ecclesial and christological axes that have been proposed as constitutive of its nature.]*

IT IS IMPOSSIBLE to deny that there has been a serious, fundamental, and sustained theological development of the family since Vatican II. For the first time, beginning with the conciliar debates, the family was taken up as a separate theological topic and, surprisingly, at that time at least, within terms of ecclesiology. At the heart of this process was the recovery of the family as the “domestic church.” With the promulgation of *Lumen gentium* (1964),<sup>1</sup> this ancient patristic concept of the baptized family was reinserted into modern theological parlance. However, this reintroduction was done with little or no explanation and, it should be noted, with no developed theological grounding.<sup>2</sup> Because the modern history of this term is so short, one can easily trace the trajectory of its development in three stages.

In the first stage, the term domestic church was only tentatively reap-

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<sup>1</sup> To this can be added the later *Apostolicam actuositatem* (1965) which adds indirectly to the concept of the family as the domestic church.

<sup>2</sup> Maurice Eminyan states: “And yet it seems to be a fact that a theology of the family has to this day not yet been worked out . . . a systematic treatise on the theology of the family, has to my knowledge, still to be written” (*Theology of the Family* [Malta: Jesuit Publications, 1994] 8–9).

propriated at Vatican II.<sup>3</sup> At that point the family could only be understood in relationship to the Church in an analogous manner. The second stage came immediately after the council when the theological development of this term (as well as its usage) was nothing short of meteoric. During this phase, the fundamental categories of Vatican II (Christocentrism, personalism, and universal holiness) which controlled the council, now acted as a hermeneutical catalyst by which the nature of the family could be fruitfully examined and articulated. With the publication of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1992) came the third stage. In an observable development of doctrine, domestic church moved from an *analogous* position to an *ontological* relationship with the Church. This brought the first stage of its developmental trajectory to a conclusion. The question which confronts us is not about the existence of such development, but rather to what extent this development has been carried out and whether or not it is legitimate. The purpose of my article is to examine how this development has proceeded and to show its continuity with, and its deepening of, the seminal idea in Scripture and the Church Fathers. By way of conclusion, I examine some of the problems which the acceptance and legitimization of this term face.

### PRIOR TO VATICAN II

In some ways, John Paul II represents the extent of the development that has taken place concerning the family. Prior to the council, he wrote an important book on marriage and family entitled *Love and Responsibility*. At this point, he defined the family as “an educational institution within the framework of which the personality of a new human being is formed.”<sup>4</sup> Elsewhere, in the same book, he referred to the family as “a small society, and the existence of all large societies—nation, state, Church—depends on it”<sup>5</sup> or “an institution based on marriage.”<sup>6</sup> Arguably, this presentation does not describe the family as a domestic church nor does he allude to its fundamental ecclesial nature. Only after Wojtyla’s experience of Vatican II did he begin his radical<sup>7</sup> investigation of the family. He became personally responsible for describing the ecclesiological dimension of the family (as constitutive) in the Church’s consciousness.

<sup>3</sup> Its inclusion in the document caused little stir and it has taken time for the family as domestic church to find its place in the theological consciousness of the Church.

<sup>4</sup> Karol Wojtyla, *Love and Responsibility* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1981) 242.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* 217.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> “Radical” as suggested by the Latin word *radix* referring to the fundamental “roots.”

Perhaps nothing exemplifies this theological shift more than the exchange which took place on the floor of Vatican II on November 23, 1962. In many ways, this was the watershed moment from which all progress can be marked. The draft on the nature of the Church—which listed all the constitutive parts of the Church—was being discussed. Bishop Pietro Fiordelli (1916–2004) of Prato, Italy, who had worked in the Christian Family Movement, rose and made the following intervention:

But these drafts, it painfully seems to me (in my humble opinion) that in all of the documents nothing is to be found by way of a special chapter which concerns another state in the Church which is of the greatest nobility and sanctity . . . namely the state of sacramental marriage.<sup>8</sup>

As Fiordelli began to draw out the implications of what he had said, the president objected and stated that these ideas were *extra ordinem huius schematis*.<sup>9</sup> This reaction is understandable even though, around the time of the council, a reevaluation of the nature and role of the family was being explored by a few people (such as Fiordelli and Paul Evdokimov). However, these ideas were not yet a part of the Church's consciousness—as clearly seen from this objection raised to Fiordelli's presentation. At this point, the intrinsic relationship between Church and family was not grasped.

Given the postconciliar advances in theology, it is perhaps difficult for us to appreciate the functional understanding of marriage and family that obtained prior to the council. While the sacramentality of marriage was officially affirmed, nonetheless, there was a hesitancy to see the positive, grace-filled aspects of marriage and family and its position as a state of holiness. Historically, this can be traced among other things to a certain uneasiness with certain aspects of human sexuality, and the dominance of a monastic and celibate lifestyle as a model for Christian perfection.

It took the Church about a millennium to define formally the sacramentality of marriage precisely because it was difficult for theologians to accord a truly spiritual effect to the physical realities of marriage. Also, fallen human sexuality is deeply wounded and problematic. It would be sheer

<sup>8</sup> "Sed his praemissis, humiliter mihi dolendum videtur, quod in toto schemate nullum inveniatur speciale caput quod agat de aliquo statu in Ecclesia, qui est maximae nobilitatis et sanctitatis et—ad incrementum Mystici Corporis Christi—maximae fecunditatis: scilicet de statu sacramentali matrimonii" Bishop Fiordelli, *Acta synodalia Sacrosanctii Concilii Oecumenici Vaticani II* (Vatican City: Vatican Press, 1960–1989) [henceforth *Acta synodalia*] vol. 1, pars 4, 309. (Translations from the acta are my own and are purposefully literal.)

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

naiveté to refuse to acknowledge this. But, an overemphasis on the negative can ultimately prevent the faithful from seeing gender and sexuality for the gifts they are, especially when redeemed by grace. With the Edict of Constantine and the ushering in of the worldly masses into the Church, some sought to perfect their Christian life within monastic settings. For many centuries, this became normative in the pursuit of Christian perfection and unfortunately (and erroneously) caused marriage and family to be accorded a second-class status within the Church, at least at a perceptual level. As John Paul II affirmed in *Familiaris consortio*, the Church has always and unhesitatingly “defended the superiority of this charism (i.e., celibacy) to that of marriage.”<sup>10</sup> But this has never been to denigrate or even question the value of married life. Indeed, biblically speaking, it is the marital state which has the iconic value of showing to the world the love of Christ for his Church. In reality, each of these states of life informs the other.<sup>11</sup>

Fiordelli, wanting to correct these limiting perceptions, addressed the assembled bishops, asking that the council formally acknowledge the essential goodness of marriage and legitimate it as a way of holiness. “For to-day, it seems by many that a special place in the Mystical Body of Christ *must* be given to those who are situated in the state of Christian marriage.”<sup>12</sup> He wished to emphasize that the marital state was indeed “a sacramental (state) . . . (and) not purely a formality.”<sup>13</sup> The novelty of these ideas and the perceived threat they posed clearly can be seen in the interventions at that time and the caution that Fiordelli exercised when introducing anything positive about marriage. He was careful to show that anything positive about the familial state does not thereby denigrate the celibate state. These types of reactions (i.e., the fears and the caution) are instructive inasmuch as they show the degree to which the true nature of marriage and family had been obscured at that time in the thinking of people.

<sup>10</sup> “It is for this reason that the Church, throughout her history, has always defended the superiority of this charism to that of marriage, by reason of the wholly singular link which it has with the Kingdom of God” (*Familiaris consortio* no. 16). At this point, *Familiaris consortio* gives the footnote: Cf. Pius XII, encyclical *Sacra Virginitas*, II: AAS 46 (1954) 174 ff.

<sup>11</sup> “Virginitas or celibacy for the sake of the Kingdom of God not only does not contradict the dignity of marriage but presupposes it and confirms it. Marriage and virginitas or celibacy are two ways of expressing and living the one mystery of the covenant of God with his people” (*Familiaris consortio* no. 16).

<sup>12</sup> “Plurimis enim hodie videtur quod specialis locus in Mystico Corpore Christi tribuendus sit iis qui in statu matrimoniali christiano positi sunt” (*Acta synodalia*, vol. 1, pars 4, 309).

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* 309–10.

## FOUNDATIONS FOR THEOLOGY OF THE FAMILY

It is in the debates of Vatican II, rather than in the actual documents, that we find the seminal ideas which have informed and structured the renewal of the theology of the family. In his second speech, Fiordelli, surprisingly, yet logically, laid bare the theological structure of the family: "It seems to me that this would be the true structure of the Church of Christ. . . . Is the parish the ultimate division of the Church? No. The parish is further divided into so many holy cells, which are *Christian families*, which we can call, following the example of the Holy Fathers, tiny churches."<sup>14</sup> His desire was to show the organic connection of the family with the Church; that the parish is not its smallest articulation, but rather the family is the Church's smallest organic cell. He then showed how the family possesses a legitimacy with regards to the Body of Christ which goes beyond even that of the parish since the family proceeds *ex voluntate ipsius Christi* and is therefore *iuris divini*.<sup>15</sup> Then, in a perhaps novel contribution, Fiordelli extended the spiritual reality of marriage to the whole of family life. Christ "has made sacramentally the institution of the family holy."<sup>16</sup>

Finally, in his 1963 submission, Fiordelli brought his last three precisions to his understanding of the domestic church. He first proposed that families be seen not only as members of the Church but also as organs and communities of Christ's Body.<sup>17</sup> Secondly, he applied Ephesians 5:32 not only to marriage but now extended it to the family which proceeds out of marriage and states: "It is possible to refer to the Christian family as a small church possessing in itself a sharing (communication) of the very mystery of the union of Christ with the Church."<sup>18</sup> Thirdly, he spoke of parents being, as it were, consecrated (*consecrati*) to their roles.<sup>19</sup> To clench his argument, Fiordelli then quoted from both St. Augustine of Hippo and St. John Chrysostom who directly develop the idea of domestic church and use either that language exactly (Augustine) or approximate it (Chrysostom).<sup>20</sup>

<sup>14</sup> "Mihi videtur quod haec sit vera structuratio Ecclesiae Christi. . . . Nunc autem: estne paroecia ultima divisio Ecclesiae? Non. Paroecia ulterius dividitur in tot cellulas sanctas, quae sunt familiae christianae, quas vocare possumus, exemplum Sanctorum Patrum secuti, velut minusculas Ecclesias" (ibid. 310-11).

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. 311.

<sup>16</sup> "Sanctum immo sacramentale fecit ipsum institutum familiare" (ibid. 311.)

<sup>17</sup> "Quod si praeter membra, in Ecclesia, etiam organa et communitates . . . considerentur . . . familiae christianae" (*Acta synodalia*, vol. 2, pars 1, 794). "What if more than just members the family was considered even as organs and communities in the Church?"

<sup>18</sup> "Minusculam ecclesiam familiam christianam vocare possumus, in se habentem communicationem ipsius mysterii unionis Christi cum Ecclesia" (ibid. 794).

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. 795.

<sup>20</sup> "cum tota domestica vestra ecclesia" (Augustine, *De bono viduitatis* [PL

In both these Church Fathers one finds a prolonged understanding of the unique episcopal-like role of the father as head of the family, who is responsible for its religious education, and who is called to become a Christ-like servant to his family, and thereby serve Christ.

These principal ideas of Firodelli's became, as it were, the fundamental building blocks out of which the theology of the family as domestic church was built: the family as the smallest organic cell of the Church; familial life as a way of holiness; the sacramental nature of the family; the fundamental ecclesial nature of the family and its sharing in the mission of Christ; family, like marriage, being considered part of the great *mysterion* of Ephesians 5:32; and parents seen as consecrated for their roles and thus live out their priesthood in a uniquely familial manner. The problem, however, is that while these intuitions and assertions appear to be correct, they were not theologically grounded. In some ways, it is amazing that such a radical reevaluation of marriage and family was accepted without further theological investigation. By the end of the debates, Fiordelli's position was essentially accepted, but only in a cautious and limited manner. Only in *Lumen gentium* no. 11 is the term used explicitly and only in an analogous manner. It states that: "In what might be regarded as the Domestic Church (*In hac velut Ecclesia Domestica*. . .), the parents, by word and example are the first heralds of the faith with regard to their children."<sup>21</sup>

The importance of inclusion of domestic church in *Lumen gentium* is not that it endorsed a systematic theology of the family or affirmed all that was said during the debates, for it did not. What it accomplished was to begin the process of reevaluating the place of the family within theology and, by affirming the phrase "domestic church," *Lumen gentium* provided the critical hermeneutic by which the family could be studied. From this point onward, the family was to find its identity and theological center in its ecclesial nature. Thus the theological development of the family was not left victim to the theological vicissitudes of the modern age but was grounded in a patristic and ecclesiological framework. Clearly, the term had to be unpacked but at least now it was once again a part of the Church's consciousness—something that had not occurred for approxi-

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40.450]); "Domum . . . vestram non parvam Christi ecclesiam deputamus" (Augustine *Ep. 188,3* [PL 33.849]); "Domum tuam ecclesiam fac" (Chrysostom, *In Gen 6,2* [PG 54, 607]).

<sup>21</sup> *Lumen gentium* no. 11 (*Vatican II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, ed. A. Flannery (North Port, N.Y.: Costello, 1975). "In hac velut Ecclesia Domestica parentes verbo et exemplo sint pro filiis suis primi fidei praecones, et vocationem unicuique propriam . . . foveant oportet." See Michael Fahey, "The Christian Family as Domestic Church at Vatican II," in *The Family*, ed. Lisa S. Cahill and Dietmar Mieth, *Concilium* 1995/5, 89.

mately 1,500 years. However, criteria for its authentic development needed to be established.

### DEVELOPMENT: POST-VATICAN II

It is an arguable point that the concept of the family as a domestic church would have remained an interesting but dormant footnote in the history of the council had it not been for the pontificate of John Paul II. While Paul VI<sup>22</sup> and John Paul I<sup>23</sup> briefly mention the term, it is only with John Paul II that a systematic analysis is attempted and a “theology of domestic church” is fleshed out. His achievement is that he not only secured a permanent place for this concept in the Church’s magisterium, but established it as the dominant hermeneutic by which the family was to be understood. Most importantly, he did not allow this newly recovered construct to free float theologically. Rather, he provided a definitive interpretative framework by which the domestic church is to be understood, and he established that the family must be understood through the prism of its ecclesiological and Christological identity. In an amazing statement, John Paul II stated that “families . . . will manifest to all people the Savior’s living presence in the world, and the genuine nature of the Church” (*Familiaris consortio* no. 50). Would that statement have been possible prior to the council?

In his apostolic exhortation, *Familiaris consortio*, the “summa of the Church’s teaching on family,”<sup>24</sup> John Paul II begins with the fundamental call of the Gospel: conversion to Christ.<sup>25</sup> Then in a deft move, to prevent a mere moralism from developing or an extrinsicism in regards to the life

<sup>22</sup> *Marialis cultus* nos. 52–53 (*Acta apostolicae sedis* 66 [1974] 13–168).

<sup>23</sup> John Paul I to a group of Bishops from the United States given on Sept 21, 1978: “The Christian Family: A Community of Love,” *L’Osservatore Romano*, 28 September 1978, 11: “The Christian family is so important and its role is so basic in transforming the world and in building up the Kingdom of God that the Council called it a “domestic church“ (*Lumen Gentium*).”

<sup>24</sup> John Paul II, Address “La Chiesa rinnova il dialogo con il mondo per favorire la comprensione tra i popoli,” [December 22, 1981], in *Insegnamenti di Giovanni Paolo II*, 4/2 (1981) 1215. “. . . mediante la recentissima Esortazione Apostolica “Familiaris Consortio“, resa pubblica una settimana fa, che vuol essere una “summa” dell’insegnamento della Chiesa sulla vita, i compiti, la responsabilita, la missione del matrimonio e della famiglia nel mondo d’oggi.”

<sup>25</sup> “The Church once again feels the pressing need to proclaim the Gospel . . . to all those who are called to marriage . . . The Church is deeply convinced that only by the acceptance of the Gospel are the hopes that man legitimately places in marriage and in the family capable of being fulfilled” (*Familiaris consortio* no. 3). “We must all set ourselves in opposition through a conversion of mind and heart, following Christ Crucified by denying our own selfishness” (*Familiaris consortio* no. 9).

and activity of the family, John Paul II clearly unites being and mission, ontology and praxis. “The family finds in the plan of God . . . not only its identity . . . but also its mission . . . . The role that God calls the family to perform in history derives from what the family is . . . family become what you are” (*Familiaris consortio* no. 17). As will be noted shortly, this principle will become increasingly important in the ensuing debates over the “nature” of the domestic church.

John Paul II situates the identity of the family along two axes: Christ and the Church. In nos. 17–49, the bulk of the document, *Familiaris consortio* defines the family’s essence and role as being “to guard, reveal and communicate love.” But, once again, this is not merely an amorphous phrase. It is further defined by its interior reference to Christ. “This is a . . . real sharing in God’s love for humanity and the love of Christ the Lord for the Church his bride” (*Familiaris consortio* no.17). It is this that reveals the ecclesiological nature of the family. John Paul II then divides this into four constitutive aspects: (1) forming a community of persons, (2) serving life, (3) participating in the development of society, and (4) sharing in the life and mission of the Church. These are marks of the Church and the family. If it truly shares in the life of the Church, the family cannot be separated from the Church but must be inserted into its very reality thereby becoming true to its nature.

Immediately following this presentation, John Paul II begins to develop the second axis of the family: its relationship to Christ himself. He writes that to understand the “substance” of the family one must do so “in reference to Jesus Christ as Prophet, Priest and King” (*Familiaris consortio* no. 51). This is further expanded in terms of the family being (a) a believing and evangelizing community (prophetic nature), (b) a community in dialogue with God (priestly nature), and (c) a community at the service of humanity (kingly nature) (ibid. no. 50). *This means that the nature of the family is to be found in the nature of Christ.*

This conviction is not a self-evident statement. By all estimations, it is rather an astonishing one. One can easily draw the parallel between the family and the Church, inasmuch as both have a community-like structure and purpose. But with the injection of this Christological dimension, one is truly entering into the realm of the *mysterion*. The late pontiff grounds this in the sacrament of matrimony and later refines this further by stating that marriage “makes specific the sanctifying grace of Baptism” (ibid. no. 56). While this was adequate for his presentation, it is here that the greatest work has yet to be achieved. John Paul II gave us the hint, but until there is a recovery of the profound reality of baptism and its effecting not only transformational but also ontological change (*i.e.*, our being indwelt by Christ), the Christological nature of the family will remain not only the mystery (in the sense of *mysterion*) that it truly is, but will be wrapped in



an enigma. It is the inner reality of baptism that unlocks the mystery of the domestic church.

The power of this analysis is somewhat Pauline because it cuts through the exterior layers and shows the sacramental nature of reality, in this case the family. In the famous passage of Ephesians 5, Paul, drawing from the order of creation, is at pains to show how husbands and wives are to live out their marriage and are involved not in a culturally conditioned relationship but in a sacred order. He shows how headship means that the husband must lay down his life for his wife because he is head “as Christ also is head of the Church.” The Lord, out of his love for his Bride, dies for her. By verse 32, Paul wakes up, as it were, to the reality of what he is speaking about, as if to say: “In talking about the prosaic reality of marriage, I really am talking about the mystery of Christ’s love for the Church.” Similarly, John Paul II, through the prism of domestic church, revealed the profound and hidden mystery of the family—its ecclesial and Christological nature.

Thus, at this point in time, (1) the term domestic church has been recovered as a dominant hermeneutic of the family, (2) its development—to be authentic—*must* be rooted in Scriptural and Patristic categories, and (3) its nature cannot be subjectively determined but is grounded in its ecclesial and Christological ontology<sup>26</sup> which is ultimately revelatory of the Church itself of which it is an organic part. The task still remaining is to prevent this term from being co-opted for any ends that one may choose. This can only be done by discovering the God-given, constitutive structure and nature of domestic church and this, in turn, will provide it with its own adequate theological grounding.

## THE PROBLEMS

### First: Epistemological

There are serious problems regarding the authentic reception of this doctrine. The first is the nature of modern consciousness. In *Letter to Families*, John Paul II points out that the mystery of Christ as the Bridegroom lies at the heart of marriage and family, and it is precisely this which is rejected by modern rationalism. It cannot perceive of God as the Bridegroom.

<sup>26</sup> This is an important area of study and is precisely where the development of doctrine lies and which must be explored further. It is clear that papal statements clearly move in this direction. In *Letter to Families*, John Paul II states that, “As the “domestic church”, it is the *bride of Christ*” (*Letter to Families* no.19). This further develops the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*’s assertion that the family can and should be called the domestic church (no. 2204).

Saint Paul uses a concise phrase in referring to family life: it is a “*great mystery*” (Eph 5:32). Husbands and wives thus discover in Christ *the point of reference for their spousal love*. The family itself is the great mystery of God. As the “domestic church”, it is the *bride of Christ*. Unfortunately, Western thought, with the development of *modern rationalism*, has been gradually moving away from this teaching. Within a similar anthropological perspective, the human family is facing the challenge of a *new Manichaeism*, in which body and spirit are put in radical opposition; Modern rationalism *does not tolerate mystery*. It does not accept the mystery of man as male and female. The deep-seated roots of the “great mystery” . . . have been lost in the modern way of looking at things. The “great mystery” is threatened in us and all around us (*Familiaris consortio* no.19).

Unless we successfully challenge this type of thinking, and show the reality of the symbolic (i.e. sacramental) value of that which is concrete, the world will be trapped in a materialist worldview incapable of comprehending or even perceiving the spiritual.

### Second: Legitimacy

The question needs to be raised as to how legitimate is this development of the family as domestic church. It is clear that to use domestic church as a hermeneutic for the family flows directly from the Church’s patrimony and is an outgrowth of the reality of baptism. But little solid work has been done in grounding this concept theologically. John Paul II has sketched out a theology for us but further and extensive grounding of this is a necessity. From initial work that has been done, it is clear there first needs to be a recovery of the Old Testament understanding of the family on which the New Testament understanding is predicated. Here we will find that the family can be defined in its formal aspect as, what I term, “the carrier of the covenant.” Essential to its grounding is the understanding of baptism (alluded to by John Paul II) and the theology of creation (alluded to by St. Paul), as well as the recovery of the Semitic concept of corporate personality.<sup>27</sup> One must be careful to understand that the reality of the family as the ecclesial unit (domestic church) is found in the New Testament not by the mere existence of the term (which in the Vulgate is problematic) but more importantly emerges from the New Testament understanding of baptism. This is given particular witness by household baptisms.<sup>28</sup> The family in the New Testament now becomes what I call the sphere of eschatological reality. Finally, today one has witnessed a genuine development of doctrine. Vatican II could only use analogous language about the family and church: “In what might be regarded as the domestic church.” With the publication of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, the Church now employed ontological language: “The Christian family constitutes a specific

<sup>27</sup> Only by such a recovery can passages such as 1 Corinthians 7 be explained properly.

<sup>28</sup> Acts 11:13 ff.; 16:15; 16:33; 1 Corinthians 1:16.

revelation and realization of ecclesial communion, and for this reason it can and should be called a domestic church” (no. 2204).<sup>29</sup>

### Third: Problematic Appropriation

The greatest threat to the notion of the domestic church lies elsewhere. There is a real danger that the concept of domestic church may become an empty theological tag, used without due regard for its constitutive theological nature. This, in the end, can seriously confuse or even wound the authentic nature of the family as the *ecclesia domestica*. Indeed, this is a danger for any theological concept. This may be done out of a misplaced compassion as people seek to be inclusive. “Define family any way you are comfortable with and you are Church.” But is this legitimate? Some find the ecclesial and Christological dimension of family too limiting, and prefer to see family principally as a sociological unit which can affect its own self-definition. For some, the domestic church (as christologically or ecclesiological defined) might appear too restrictive or possibly judgmental. One modern theological writer, who brings up these themes, writes:

Given the current state of our Church and society, it is easy to see that the guiding beliefs of domestic church might not be universally accepted. In an age where families are broken apart for a variety of reasons, and where many individuals do not experience a healthy family life, it is important to consider how this concept can be well-utilized in the Church to-day . . . First there is considerable debate about the meaning of the term “family” . . . The official teaching of the Roman Catholic Church, for example, insists that the Christian family must spring from Christian marriage . . . This raises a question as to what happens in families where kinship springs from a relationship that is not marriage, for example, the single mother who chooses to raise her child outside of marriage. According to social scientists, this would be a family, but in the eyes of the church, would this relationship constitute domestic church? Some would say no; domestic church occurs in a family formed from Christian marriage. I prefer a definition of domestic church which respects the ideals presented in *Gaudium et spes*, but which recognizes the diversity in which contemporary families are formed. . . .<sup>30</sup>

One appreciates the dangers of an overly legalistic approach. The problem here, however, is that a non-objective approach edges closely to denying that the family in Christ, precisely as domestic church, has any specific constitutive dimensions, and that it is uniquely defined by the created

<sup>29</sup> I wish to thank my former student, K. Fourier, for his formulation of this. As noted above, in *Letter to Families*, John Paul II asserts that “as the ‘domestic church’, [the family] is the *bride of Christ*” [ibid. no. 19].

<sup>30</sup> Joanne Heaney-Hunter, “Domestic Church: Guiding Beliefs and Daily Practices,” in *Christian Marriage and Family: Contemporary Theological and Pastoral Perspectives*, ed. Michael G. Lawler and William P. Roberts (Collegeville: Liturgical, 1996) 60.

and salvific order. It restricts the formative power of the baptized family's ecclesial nature from being determinative. The counterbalance to this self-defining approach is the argument that only in its salvific and ecclesial identity does the family find the full truth of its being. This cannot be manipulated but must be received as a gift. The danger is that domestic church can become a "concept" into which anyone of us can pour one's own "content": we can then have preferences as to its meaning. The non-objective approach leads inevitably to restructuring the very identity of the family (with implications for the salvific order) which no longer has any objective definition. This would be unfortunate as the concept of domestic church could then be "filled" with any content and become merely a tool to be used for whatever end one was pursuing. In effect, it would only be an empty label. This denies there is a fundamental reality which constitutively transforms a family giving it a new ontological reality and thereby an essential specificity which is not negotiable.

There must be some boundaries. It is clear that differences can be a good thing. However, when diversity is of such a nature that it attacks the constitutive structure of an entity, it cannot then be said to participate properly in that reality. As long as any specific diversity is not contrary to the fundamental structure of the family in Christ, there is no problem. When it is, it becomes destructive of this reality. The critical and important issue of legitimate boundaries which define the essence of the domestic church has received scant attention but needs to be addressed. It can only be answered as one uncovers more fully the authentic theological foundation on which the family as domestic church is built.

At the heart of the Church is the person of Jesus Christ. To be in Christ, to be part of his Body, is to encounter the salvific power of Christ and to be converted by him, choosing to be his disciple. To choose him means to seek to be formed by and in him not as an ideal but in our own actual historical reality. Surely, any reality which mitigates or is intrinsically opposed to Christ and his expressed will cannot be said to participate in him. Can the domestic church be construed in any other terms?

## CONCLUSION

One of the critical functions of the term domestic church is that it serves as the hermeneutic by which one comes to know the truth about marriage and family. Understood aright, the domestic church is the end for which marriage and family were created. The reality (to which the Scriptures and the core of Jewish-Christian tradition attest) is that the salvific family (i.e., the domestic church) is not a free-floating construct, awaiting the informing principles either of theologians or of a modern secular society. Rather, it is grounded in the Person of the Word of God, is part of his revelation, and

is a critical part of the salvific plan of God for all humanity. In fact, it is a sign of contradiction. In becoming part of his body, our bodies become part of him. When, in love, we give ourselves bodily to another in covenantal terms, our two bodies become one flesh in Christ, the fruit of which is the procreation of other bodily realities made in the image of God. The mystery of the baptized family is that we are called to be an organic part of the body of Jesus Christ, to participate in his nature and his salvific mission to the world. Only here does one find one's true identity and purpose as individuals, as families, and as the domestic church.